

The Christian News-Letter

No. 245

Edited by
KATHLEEN BLISS

17th October, 1945

DEAR MEMBER,

An inescapable duty of the Church in all ages and all lands is to evangelize. But when this simple statement has been made a thousand questions arise as to what precisely evangelism means in our day, by whom and how it should be carried out.

The Report of the Commission on Evangelism will be before the Church Assembly at its November meeting. The Church of Scotland has by its report on *God's Will in our Time* done much to help towards an understanding of the world in which evangelism has to take place: its commission on evangelism is likely to report within a few weeks. Meanwhile, experiments in evangelism are taking place and others of widely different types are likely to follow. We drew attention some months ago to Dr. George MacLeod's *We Shall Rebuild* (C.N.-L. No. 227). The British Council of Churches is arranging for an inter-Church conference on the subject of evangelism, over which the Archbishop of Canterbury will preside, in the first week of the new year.

In view of the great importance of the subject we are devoting our whole space in this number of the News-Letter to questions that are raised by the Report which will come before the Church Assembly. Successive drafts of the Supplement have been discussed by groups and submitted to a number of commentators with widely different ranges of experience, who have written long and illuminating letters or memoranda. Many minds have thus contributed to the Supplement which could not have taken its present shape without their help. In order that those who disagree with it may have a target for attack Dr. Oldham has taken responsibility for putting into final form a statement which, in its main argument, is the expression of what has revealed itself to be to a large extent a common mind.

Yours sincerely,

Kathleen Bliss

THE CONVERSION OF ENGLAND

If the Report published under the title *Towards the Conversion of England*,¹ had been limited to questions relating to the expansion and improvement of practical efforts of evangelism, it would not have called for extended treatment in a Supplement. It is not our purpose, nor is there space, to consider its proposals in detail nor to review it as a whole.

Our concern here is primarily with the more fundamental questions which are implied in the title and treated explicitly, though briefly, in the opening chapter entitled "Diagnosis" and which underlie much that is said elsewhere in the Report.

If the question is asked whether the Church of England can accept this Report as an adequate expression of its understanding of what is involved in the Christian conversion of England, the answer must, in our view, be a decided No. The problem is not seen in a true perspective, and the solutions proposed are consequently inadequate.

We are well aware that the majority of the people with whom the Church comes in contact in its parishes are simple folk, not greatly interested in ideas, who want a simple faith by which to live. But even these are subject in increasing measure to the powerful forces which are insidiously forming the outlook and moulding the lives of men and women to-day. Very little is said in the following pages that does not enter in some form into the experience of ordinary people and affect their lives, even though they may not be aware of it. It is idle, moreover, to talk of the conversion of England unless we pay special regard to the active and intelligent minority who spread ideas, set an example, give the tone to society and are the agents of all change.

A Report presented to the Church Assembly raises the question how the *leadership* of the Church understands the task of evangelism in contemporary society. We covet for the Church of England a full imaginative awareness of the actual religious situation.

If in the attempt to understand our real predicament we find that the problems are greater and the difficulties more formidable than we supposed, this is no ground for discouragement. The Prime Minister did not attempt in 1940 to conceal from the nation the desperate nature of the crisis, while at the same time he communicated to it his own unshakable faith in its capacity to respond to the challenge. The greatness of the opposition we encounter may reveal to us the greatness of the power with which we are allied.

¹ Press and Publications Board, 2 Great Peter Street, London, S.W. 1. 1s.

I. DIAGNOSIS

THE LIVE ALTERNATIVE TO CHRISTIANITY

The most serious shortcoming in the Report, perhaps, is that in considering the conversion of England it fails to recognize, and consequently never comes to grips with, the real faith which competes with Christianity in the minds of men to-day. The vast majority of those who carry on or direct the activities of secular society believe in an alternative means for the redemption both of the individual and of society, which they regard, avowedly or in practice, as more efficacious than Christianity. It may be called salvation through knowledge.

The Report speaks of the trust in human progress being "pulverized by the brutal logic of events." It is certainly true that there is to-day widespread disillusionment, cynicism and despair, and they may very well increase. But this does not alter the fact that, among the victorious nations at any rate, the prevailing temper is a largely unshaken confidence in man's power to control and shape his destiny. Men to-day may take a more sober view of human progress and be more ready to acknowledge that grave set-backs are possible. But the faith persists that man is capable of profiting from his mistakes and learning how better to achieve his purposes.

What we have in mind is not so much consciously held theories, as what men actually do. Hundreds of thousands of patient investigators throughout the world are quietly and steadily engaged in finding out how human nature actually works, what conditions produce what results, how in fact people respond to this or that situation. Psychological and sociological science is amassing an immense and growing fund of knowledge and placing it at the disposal of those who, as administrators, teachers, journalists and social workers, are in a position to mould the lives of others.

The attempt to control human nature by understanding it, is in its early beginnings. It is only to be expected that in the first stages, hypotheses should hold the field which are later found to be mistaken. But the process of learning is continuous, and error points the way to more accurate understanding. This rapidly accumulating knowledge and the power that it confers are something new in human history. They are capable of an expansion which cannot be foreseen and it would be folly to attempt to set limits in advance to the success which they may achieve.

The attitude of the Church towards this new knowledge, which confers on man a growing power to control his own development, is necessarily a dual one.

Since all truth is of God, the new factor must be given its full place in our interpretation of God's redemptive purpose. This involves a greater change in our understanding and presentation of the Gospel than has yet taken place. We need a clearer and franker recognition that God works through other ministries besides the Church for the healing and perfecting of man's life, and that many insights that are not specifically religious have their part to play in bringing about successful adjustments to life. The observation of gang behaviour has shown, for example, how little can be achieved by teaching or admonition addressed to the individual. Boys have to be approached as members of the gang. The way to influence them is to find for the gang a new and socially useful task. This observation of fact is religiously neutral and can be used by Christians and non-Christians alike, but no evangelism that leaves it out of account is adequate to its total task.

It is a pity that the Report should have used a word of multiple meanings like "humanism" in a purely depreciatory sense. Man is God's creation and the Gospel is a message of the restoration and true fulfilment of the human. It must also be recognized that humanism has brought to light and developed possibilities of human existence that have been underestimated by both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. It is an historical fact that it was when men refused to accept the interpretation of the world offered them by religion as exhaustive that their horizons began to broaden. There is a large positive gain in the achievements of recent centuries which we must believe has its part in the fulfilment of God's purpose.

On the other hand, while there is no incompatibility between Christianity and the growth of knowledge, there does arise in practice, between Christian faith and a self-sufficient humanism a conflict of the acutest kind. Men can use their enhanced powers, as we have only too clearly seen, for the most inhuman purposes. Even when their intentions are good, pride and complacency may blind them to the true end of man's existence and lead them into fatal error. The Commission are wholly right in insisting that to regard man as the measure of all things and the creator of all values is, from the Christian standpoint, the most disastrous of errors. There is no more urgent task to-day than to save men from the excesses of human pride and of despair by showing them their insufficiency in themselves and their dependence on grace. But it can be fulfilled, not by proclaiming the truth from outside the human struggle, but by sharing fully in the experience of contemporary men as they strive to order their common life in the light of such knowledge as they possess.

We have to be particularly on our guard against anything which seems like an attempt to exploit the present human predicament in

a narrow ecclesiastical interest and can be interpreted as meaning that because men have refused to listen to what the Church teaches they have got into the present mess. The Churches are part of the civilization which is collapsing, and must acknowledge that their own secularization, supineness and unfaithfulness have largely contributed to the collapse.

THE AUTONOMY OF THE SECULAR

A second fundamental problem, which the Report recognizes without touching more than its fringe, is how the Christian life may be lived in the society of to-day. Until the width and depth of the rift between the Christian faith and the prevailing attitudes of modern society have been brought fully into the open all talk about the conversion of England is quite unreal.

Whereas for Christians the course and direction of human history are understood in the light of the Gospel story, for the modern mind the emergence of Christianity is merely an episode, even if it be an important episode, in a far vaster historical and cosmic process. It is true that in the ethical sphere Christian standards and sanctions still retain in this country a hold over men's minds. There is a widespread mistrust of pure relativism in the sphere of morals, and a reluctance to abandon the belief that certain actions are categorically right. This sense of unconditional moral obligation has, however, suffered a severe shock from the processes of total war and from the too uncritical acquiescence of Christians as well as others in those processes, and it is being persistently and progressively sapped by the ascendancy of a view of man which regards him primarily not as a being responsible to God and his fellow-men, but as adventurer, architect and master in a world which exists to satisfy his desire for acquisition and power.

The degree to which individuals are exposed in their various environments to the tendencies which dominate the activities of the modern world varies indefinitely, and generalizations are consequently out of place. But there can be no doubt that large numbers have to fulfil their daily tasks in an environment in which the Christian conception of life is fundamentally denied both in thought and practice. Dr. George MacLeod has impressed on us that the young Christian who enters industry to-day may find himself moving in circles in which the dominant ideas are *at every point* at variance with the Christian understanding of the world.

If what has been said about the prevailing outlook and attitudes of our present society is true, there is for Christians whose activities lie in the secular sphere no escape from a divided mind. They have to endure the tension of living simultaneously in two different worlds. But the *degree* in which the tension is experienced

is of great importance. There are those who maintain that in our present society, or at least in large areas of it, a man *cannot* find his human fulfilment, nor discharge his responsibility to God, in his daily work. That is an assertion so decisive in its consequences that it must either be successfully refuted or be allowed to govern our whole outlook on evangelism. What is the good of converting a man if, when he is converted, he cannot live as a Christian? The Gospel is addressed to human persons, and in so far as a man ceases to be a free and responsible person, the Gospel loses its meaning.

The Report advocates the formation of Christian vocational cells in factories and business houses. The suggestion is admirable in itself. But there is no adequate recognition of the problems which will confront such cells when they are formed. In the complex operations of modern society individuals and small groups can hardly discover for themselves the changes which Christians ought to desire; they need help which can come only from extensive enquiry and an effort of common thought. A whole host of problems present themselves in this connection which the Church has up to the present made no attempt to tackle in the way that is required.

We are far from making it a charge against the Commission that they have not gone deeply into these questions. They are questions which are engaging the attention of the Christian Frontier, and we are fully aware how little can be done about them without far larger resources than are at present available. What the Church needs to realize is that it is superficial and irresponsible to use phrases like "claiming for Christ the whole of the particular occupation in which we are engaged," or "the Church militant in action in the mission fields of industry, politics and commerce," without the clearest recognition of the colossal efforts that are required to give them any semblance of reality.

It is to the immense tasks that have been touched on in this and the preceding section that the best brains of the Church and such new resources as may be available need to be devoted rather than to an immediate exploitation for the purposes of evangelism of the new agencies and techniques for forming and guiding opinion.

Those are entirely in the right who see in these new developments immense potentialities for good or evil, of which the Church must take full account. But while there are doubtless ways in which they can be wisely used to further evangelism, by far the major problem is their effect in shaping the mind and attitude and influencing the feelings of the population as a whole. It is this aspect of these new techniques that urgently demands the attention of Christians.

THE MEANING OF WORDS

The treatment of evangelism in the Report is to some extent vitiated by unexamined assumptions about the nature of speech. There is a chapter which sets forth in generally acceptable terms the content of the Gospel. As a result of the ecumenical conferences during the past quarter of a century a large measure of doctrinal agreement has been reached among the Churches about the substance of the Christian message. But the question is never raised in the Report whether these assertions, of which Christians are firmly convinced, convey to the outsider any meaning at all. There is a special section on the presentation of the Gospel to the modern mind, which shows an awareness of the difficulty and goes a certain length towards meeting it. But the real problem lies at a deeper level than is brought out in the Report.

No missionary would delude himself into thinking that he was presenting the Gospel in a way that challenged men to a vital decision, if he addressed an uneducated Chinese audience in English. Yet we are in danger of becoming the victims of a similar illusion, if we think that because we are speaking in plain English to English listeners our words have for them the meaning we intend. Words are only noises unless they find a response in the experience of those who hear them.

Again, it is impossible, as the Commission clearly recognizes, to divorce the presentation of the Gospel from the impression created by the Church which is its bearer. "Ultimately," they say, "the evidence for the credibility of the Gospel in the eyes of the world must be a quality of life manifested in the Church, which the world cannot find elsewhere." The way in which the decision to become a Christian inevitably presents itself, consciously or unconsciously, to the ordinary man is whether he is going to become like the Church people whom he knows and to practise the same way of life. We may well ask ourselves whether those who are disinclined to attach themselves to our company may not have good grounds for their reluctance.

HAVING AND NOT HAVING THE TRUTH

The Chairman of the Commission says in his foreword that the task proposed "will certainly require most patient learning as well as most patient teaching." But in spite of this excellent intention the essential duality of attitude is not fully maintained throughout the Report, the language of which suggests at times that what the Church has is the complete truth and that the only problem is how to present it to a world in error.

Since Christianity is inseparably bound up with an historical revelation, there has shined in the hearts of those who receive it a

light to which they cannot but humbly bear witness. But it is also true that the full meaning of the Gospel is disclosed only in relation to the totality of human experience. For this reason individual Christians have always something to learn from those who have a wider and deeper knowledge of the strivings of the human spirit, or have gained through their toils and sufferings a profounder experience of life, than themselves. And in regard to the tasks and problems of secular society, in particular, it is not for those whose vocation lies outside the conflicts of political and industrial life, to presume to teach ; they have first to listen to those who live in the midst of these conflicts and who, even though they make no Christian profession, have gained, through wrestling with the problems of their daily work, a knowledge which the professional exponents of Christianity often lack. The sense of both having and not yet having the truth must as an undertone make itself felt in all Christian preaching.

Learning can mean two quite different things. At one level it means the absorption of fresh experience and fitting it into the existing framework of our thought without altering our fundamental attitude and outlook. At a deeper level it means that we learn in a way that we ourselves are changed and see the world with fresh eyes. It is in the latter sense that the Church needs to learn to-day.

II. STRATEGY

CONVERSION

Nothing that has been said is intended in the slightest degree to question the necessity, or to depreciate the significance, of conversion. Without a fundamental change in its present outlook and purposes mankind must perish. The advent of the atomic bomb compels a choice between life and death. It is equally certain that if this fundamental change of attitude is to come about, it must begin in the lives of individuals.

Nor is it difficult to see what conversion means. The essential Christian experience is a complete self-committal to God who meets us in Christ and in the circumstances of our time. Between these two encounters there is undoubtedly a tension, and the power of the Christian life lies in the whole-heartedness of our response to God who speaks to us, both from day to day in Word and Sacrament and also, for example, in the conflict between the Russian conception of democracy and our own. The present ineffectiveness of the Church and of ourselves as individuals is due not only to the half-heartedness of our Christian discipleship, but to our evasion of the total demands of life. We set up protective barriers against its searching demands

by hedging ourselves round with conventions, by resigning ourselves contentedly to a familiar routine and settled pattern of life, or by taking shelter within the walls of a narrow and rigid theology. We are inhibited by our fears and set up all kinds of defensive mechanisms to protect us from facing life as it really is.

When we make a complete committal of ourselves to Christ and to meeting life as it comes to us, there is a release of power. A man who has been freed from self-centredness and is wholly surrendered to the service of God and his fellow-men has become a channel through which the eternal forces of truth and love may do their work in the world. That is the solid core of conversion. Where can we look for a force powerful enough to reverse the currents that are hurrying the world to destruction except to a large increase of those who have entered into this experience of life and freedom?

POLICY

A different analysis of the evangelistic task from that of the Commission points to a different strategy, and it is only right to indicate in outline the form which it might take.

There lies immediately to hand a straight job of seizing every opportunity of instructing people in what the Christian faith is. The ignorance is vast and the need for overcoming it is patent.

While the conversion of England can only be brought about by dealing with the fundamental problems already discussed, there is a considerable body of professing Christians and of those who are familiar through their upbringing with the Christian tradition, to whom evangelism can be directed with some hope of success. It is on these that effort should in the first instance be concentrated.

For reaching these classes the doors are open, if we do no more than use to the full the opportunities still afforded by the parish system, stimulated and re-enforced by extra-parochial activities on the lines of the confirmation schools and leadership courses which have helped to deepen the discipleship of many Service men during the past few years. The parish priest lives among his people, enjoys their confidence and has an entry into their homes. "Visiting, now so much out of fashion," writes the Vicar of a London parish, "ought to be used to the full. It is more fruitful than sitting on evangelistic committees."

The history of the Church, and not least of the modern mission field, shows that the most powerful agency of evangelism is the attractive power of a community. Being drawn by the quality of its life men learn to share the faith by which it lives. "I am sure that in working-class parishes," writes one who knows them, "the creation of a live Christian fellowship with all sorts of activities is

the thing that first attracts the outsider. He finds a group of people doing something in which he is interested and finds when he joins them that they are happy and purposeful people who believe in something which really affects their lives. This leads him to enquire further into their faith, but the experience comes first. The workers *feel* much more readily than they think."

The parish or church meetings that are being initiated or revived to-day are a means of bringing home to people that their obligation as members of a Christian congregation is not merely to sit in the pews on Sunday, but to live responsibly as a Christian community both in their personal lives and in their participation in social activities over the whole range of life. They are able by this means to experience the vision and vitality of the Church in a much fuller way than by merely sharing in its worship. From such a fellowship individuals can go out fortified to bear their Christian witness in the world outside—in the circle of their friends, in local associations, such as community centres, women's institutes, clubs and political groups, and in their daily work. In the fellowship difficulties can be shared, opportunities recognized, and lines of approach considered, so that what the individual would be afraid to attempt alone he can courageously undertake with the encouragement and support of others.

It has been the argument of these pages that, if the conversion of England is to be taken seriously, the Christian faith must become a live option and real challenge to the mentally and practically alert minority who influence opinion and initiate action. When we enter into frank discussion with these we shall be made acutely conscious of the opposition between the modern mind and the mind of faith. Yet it is here perhaps, that our greatest evangelistic opportunity lies. If we are prepared to engage in a real conversation, recognizing that both sides have something to learn, it may lead to a deeper understanding both of the Christian faith and of the world in which we are set than we have yet been able to reach. But this can come about only if we stand alongside men in their doubt and perplexity. The effect of such conversations will be reciprocal. The modern mind will, we may hope, be illuminated by the insights of Christian faith, and the Christian mind can be redeemed from the self-enclosed sterility which is its besetting danger. It may often happen in such conversations that, without the position of either faith or unbelief being defined in set and rigid terms, those with whom we are conversing may in a moment of illumination catch a glimpse of what it means to have kept company with Christ.

God uses many different ministries and we have no wish to criticize those who feel called to undertake intensive or extensive evangelistic campaigns. But if the diagnosis which has been

offered is even approximately true, this does not appear to be the time to embark on ambitious, large-scale plans of evangelism. The reasons for this judgment have already been so fully stated that they need not be repeated. Along the lines indicated in the preceding paragraphs, there is ample scope for all the devotion, energy and enthusiasm that the Church can bring to its evangelistic task.

THE REFORMATION OF THE CHURCH

Nothing is insisted on more strongly in the letters and memoranda that have reached us than that the first necessity is that the Church, if it is to evangelize successfully, should reform itself. Evangelism is the expression of a healthy Church abounding in vitality.

The Church of England is bound in these critical times, in thinking about the conversion of England, to ask itself whether the transformation of its own life is not an essential condition of the success of efforts to win those who are without. The two cannot indeed be separated; a Church that has no kindling word to utter is dead. Nothing is further from our thoughts than to suggest that the Church should turn inwards upon itself and forget its mission to the world. But, as we have seen, the message of the Church is inevitably interpreted by those to whom it is addressed in terms of what they see the Church actually to be. If there has been the tragic failure which the Commission assert on the part of the members of the Church to display to outsiders a quality of supernatural life and power, it may be at this point that attention needs in the first instance to be concentrated.

The reformation of the Church means, first of all, the reformation of the lives of its members. That is where everything must begin. But we cannot be too clear that this involves a double process. To concern ourselves solely with the spiritual life of the members of the Church would be to deal with only one side of a wrong state of affairs, which can only be put right by treating it as a whole. The Church has lost touch with the actual life of men, and a necessity of its own renewal is to break down the defensive barriers which shut it off from the common life. Christians have to be both much more in the world, mixing with all sorts of people and taking part in their affairs, and much more separate from the world, refusing to acquiesce in many of the aims, ambitions and values of present-day society.

But the reformation of the Church means also a radical reconsideration of the outward forms, habits and activities in which its corporate life finds expression. The social and economic structure has to be made more congruous with Christian community. The Churches, which ought to lead the way in adapting themselves to

changing needs, are more conservative and averse to change than secular society. Until they give evidence of moral sincerity and inherent capacity to translate ideas into action those who are most in earnest about the reform of the national life will not take them seriously and will pay scant heed to their message.

If it is agreed that reformation and evangelism must proceed hand in hand, the suggestion might be made, if we were to think in terms of organization, that parallel with the Council on Evangelism which the Commission propose there should also be set up a Commission on the Reformation of the Church. So far as reform affects the institutional life of the Church, it has to be brought about through appropriate machinery. But the reformation which we chiefly have in mind is at a deeper level; organization and machinery are powerless to produce it, though they may become channels of its expression.

For a similar reason we hope that the Church Assembly will examine carefully the question whether the setting up of a Council on Evangelism is what is really needed. Evangelism is not so much a specialized activity as the outward expression of the total life of a living Church. At a time when the resources of the Church are greatly strained it is a question whether it is wise to increase central machinery and headquarters staff.

We live in grave times, full of uncertainties, when the road to follow is hard to discern. It is doubtful whether in such times evangelism can be planned by a central body. Planning is apt to follow familiar precedents and these may be ill-adapted to emerging and as yet dimly perceived needs. Both for evangelism and for reformation we would place our hopes rather on individuals and small groups who set themselves prayerfully, expectantly and perseveringly to discover how in their own locality or sphere of responsibility they can follow and obey the will of God. There are a considerable number of such groups of men and women who are committed to obey God in the real world, are looking to Him to reveal His will, and are prepared to meet fearlessly the demands which life makes on them. Let these persevere and reach out to make contact with those of similar mind. As these diverse groups advance along their appointed path, they may find themselves drawn into a wider movement, originated and inspired by the Holy Spirit, through which there will come to the Church a new vision of its mission and new power to fulfil it.

Subscriptions—12s. 6d. (\$3.00 in U.S.A. and Canada) for one year. 6s. 6d. for six months (Great Britain and Ireland only). Single copies 6d.; reduction for quantities.

All communications and subscriptions should be sent to—
THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER, 20 BALCOMBE STREET, DORSET SQUARE, LONDON, N.W. 1.

Published by Dr. J. H. Oldham for the Christian Frontier Council, and printed in Great Britain by the Church Army Press, Cowley, Oxford.